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THE KILLDEER

By WILLIAM DUTCHER

National Association of Audubon Societies

EDUCATIONAL LEAFLET NO. 23

This Plover, which derives its name from its oft-repeated note of *kildee, kildee, dee, dee, dee*, should be a familiar bird to all people who wisely seek their health and pleasure out-of-doors with wide-open eyes. It is found over the whole of temperate North America, and it breeds throughout its entire range. In the winter months it is found from the parallel of the Gulf States to northern South America and in the West Indies, although the writer has found them on Long Island, New York, in every month of the year but January.

It is impossible to overlook the Killdeer by reason of its beauty of coloring, its trim appearance, its stately walk when undisturbed, its rapid and graceful flight when startled. Every bird has its characteristic motion while in the air, and the student who is a close observer soon learns to know many birds from their appearance while in flight when their color is indistinguishable and their notes but faintly heard.

The writer has many bird pictures impressed upon his mind that never can be effaced while time lasts for him, and standing out among them in refreshing relief is a memory of a smooth-flowing river gently winding its way from the hills through grassy meadows toward the sea, in which it would soon be lost. It was in early autumn, when Nature exhibits her choicest colors and the birds are flocking for their leisurely journey to the distant southland, that a company of Killdeers were running about in one of the brown fields for a fare of succulent grasshoppers or crickets, all the while chatting with each other in colloquial tones.

A human intruder appeared, and the startled birds arose from the ground in flight but were reluctant to leave such rich foraging grounds. They massed in solid ranks and whirled through the air, now high in graceful evolutions, then downward with lightning rapidity, sweeping across the field; breaking ranks and flying like leaves before a gale, only to mass again for some new and intricate movement, which, if possible, was more perfect than the first.

Let us change the picture to the vernal season, and observe the Killdeer after it has returned to its breeding home, a field which man may use for growing his sugar, cotton, rice and corn or any of the other products so necessary for his happiness, and even for his very existence. Then we see the birds happily mated and employed in selecting a suitable depression in

the ground in which to place their four pyriform eggs of a delicate creamy white tint thickly spotted or lined with chocolate-brown. Like the eggs of all Plovers, their size is out of all proportion to the size of the bird.

The Killdeer does not waste any time in building a nest, and only in rare instances does it take the trouble to line the cavity in which it deposits its eggs. Alexander Wilson, however, records an interesting nest which he found "paved with fragments of clam and oyster shells, and very neatly surrounded with a mound or border of the same, placed in a very close and curious manner."

The young Killdeers have little use for a nest, after they are born, for the large size of the eggs (1.50 x 1.10 inches) permits the development of large, strong legs and feet, so the young are really never nestlings in the ordinary sense of the word, for they are prepared from birth to follow their parents abroad, not by flight but by running. They differ in this respect from the altricial birds, which do not leave their home until their wings are strong enough to support them in flight. The solicitude of the parents for their young is very marked. Wilson says: "Nothing can exceed the alarm and anxiety of these birds during the breeding season. Their cries as they winnow the air overhead, dive and course about you, or run along the ground counterfeiting lameness, are shrill and incessant. The moment they see a person approach, they fly or run to attack him with their harassing clamour, continuing it over so wide an extent of ground that they puzzle the pursuer as to the particular spot where the nest or young are concealed."

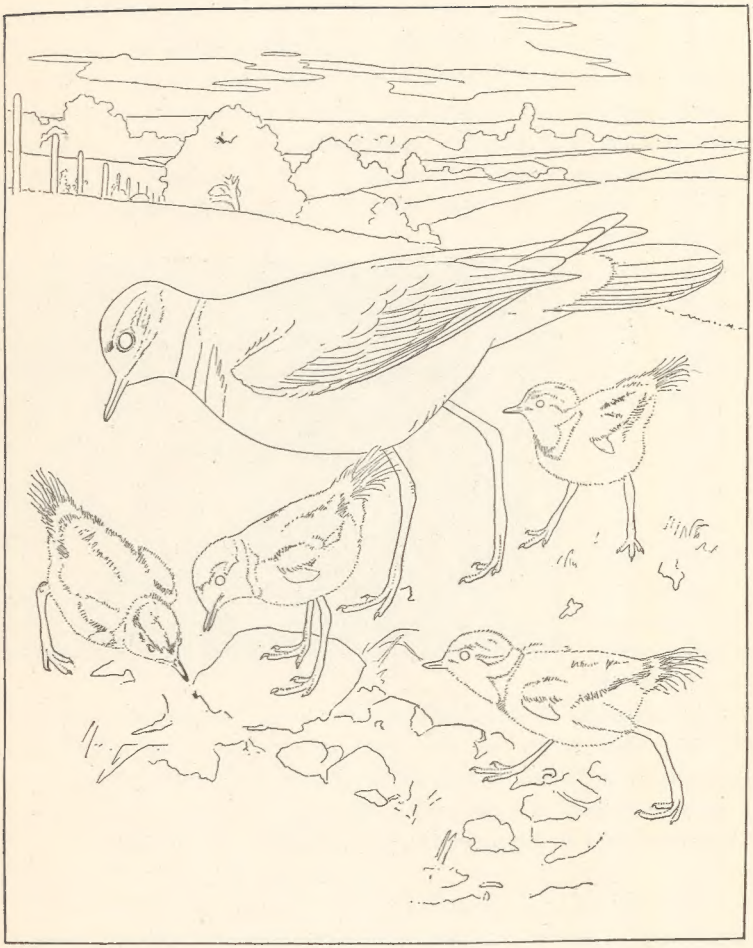
Audubon's description of the Killdeer's habits at this time are so quaint that they are quoted also: "At this period, or during incubation, the parents, who sit alternately on the eggs, never leaving them to the heat of the sun, are extremely clamourous at sight of an enemy. The female droops her wings, emits her plaintive notes, and endeavors by every means she can devise to draw you from the nest or young. The male dashes over you in the air, in the manner of the European Lapwing, and vociferates all the remonstrances of an angry parent whose family is endangered. If you cannot find pity for the poor birds at such a time, you may take up their eggs and see their distress; but if you be at all so tender-hearted as I would wish you to be, it will be quite unnecessary for me to recommend mercy." This is good advice, that I hope will be followed by every boy and girl who reads this leaflet,—in fact by every person.

If you should discover a nest of the Killdeer, carefully note the exact spot where it is located. If it contains only three eggs, it will indicate that the clutch is not yet complete and a very brief visit, after an interval of a day or two, should be made. If four eggs are then found, it will show that incubation has commenced. Visits at infrequent intervals should then be made to ascertain the time that elapses before the young birds are hatched.

KILLDEER

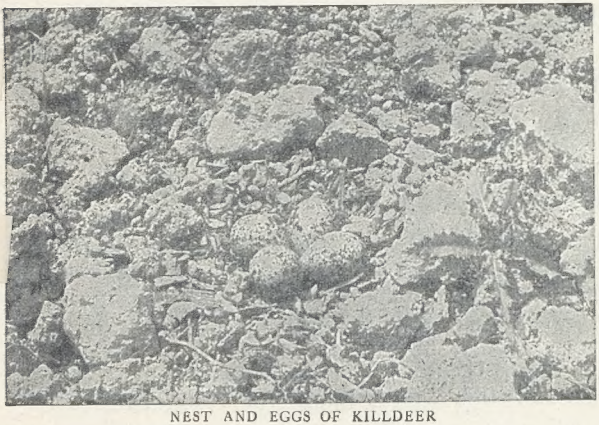
Order—Limicolæ
Genus—Ægialitis

Family—Charadriidæ
Species—Vocifera



By simply walking past the eggs, without stopping, the desired information can be secured. After the young birds are hatched it will be extremely difficult to find them, by reason of their habit of squatting and remaining perfectly still, and also because they simulate their surroundings so perfectly. The student, by such field studies, can secure a great many interesting and valuable notes, and, if care is taken, without in the least harming either the old or young birds.

The extreme watchfulness of the Killdeer at other seasons is portrayed by Audubon in one of his delightful descriptions of his own wanderings: "Reader, suppose yourself wandering over some extensive prairie, far beyond the western shores of the Mississippi. While your wearied limbs and drooping spirits remind you of the necessity of repose and food, you see the moon's silver rays glittering on the dews that have already clothed the tall grass around you. Your footsteps, be they ever so light, strike the ear of the watchful Killdeer, who, with a velocity scarcely surpassed by that of any other bird, comes up, and is now passing and repassing swiftly around you. His clear notes indicate his alarm, and seem to demand why you are there. To see him now is impossible, for a cloud has shrouded the moon; but on your left and right, before and behind, his continued vociferations intimate how glad he would be to see you depart from his beloved hunting-grounds. Nay, be not surprised if he should follow you until his eyes, meeting the glaring light of a woodsman traveler, he will wheel off and bid you adieu."



NEST AND EGGS OF KILLDEER

Having become acquainted with the Killdeer and its homelife, let us for a moment consider the relations of this bird to mankind. Unfortunately, it belongs to the class known as game-birds, but it is only so in name, for, owing to the small size of its body, it is worthless for food purposes. The appearance of the bird while in flight is very deceptive, its long wings making it appear much larger than it really is. Its home is on the ground, and all of its food is obtained there and consists very largely of insects that are extremely destructive, such as grasshoppers, crickets and coleoptera, including the boll-weevil, which is now doing such great damage in the

cotton-growing districts. It is also especially effective in holding in check the Rocky Mountain locust, having received special mention in the government report on that destructive insect.

In Bulletin No. 25, United States Department of Agriculture, the government expert, Arthur H. Howell, says: "The Killdeer frequents plowed fields, often in large numbers, and the destruction of weevils at the period of spring plowing is a highly important service."

We find that the Killdeer is of great value æsthetically by reason of its beauty and interesting personality; it is of extreme value economically because it destroys enormous numbers of insects, two kinds of which are costing the agriculturists of the country millions of dollars annually; it is practically worthless for food owing to its small size, and no self-respecting sportsman ever shoots one. Let me quote from a quaint old volume published in 1848 by that prince of sportsmen, Frank Forester, who, at the end of his chapter on the Plovers, adds these few words: "In addition to these we have the well-known, common and beautiful variety, the Killdeer Plover, so named from its peculiar cry, which it is both cruel and useless to kill, as it is too insignificant to be regarded as game." Let the public give the Killdeer the appreciation and protection it richly deserves.

Questions for Teachers and Students

How are feet of Plover different from those of other birds? Is the Killdeer found in your locality? At what season of the year? What is meaning of pyriform? What is a clutch? What is the meaning of incubation? What is the meaning of simulate? What are coleoptera? Describe the boll-weevil and its transformation. In what way is it destructive to cotton? Describe the Rocky Mountain locust and the damage it does. Use available questions in previous leaflets. Read excellent papers on the Killdeer in BIRD-LORE, Vol. I, page 35 and Vol. II, page 148; also "How to Study Birds," Vol. V, page 89.

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